

As Goes the Statue, So Goes the War: The Emergence of the Victory Frame in Television Coverage of the Iraq War

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This study analyzes how broadcast news coverage of the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein on April 9, 2003, employed a "victory" frame that crowded out other potential news narratives from that day, notably the heavy fighting continuing throughout Baghdad and other parts of Iraq. A second level of analysis comparing the news agendas of the 2 networks in the week prior to and the week after April 9th suggests that the victory frame had the effect of dramatically reducing the amount of battle-related stories.

Wars begin in declarative, often formalized, moments. One country attacks another, followed by the solemn announcement by the aggrieved country and its allies that they are at war with the invading nation. Regardless of their origins, however, wars usually also have definitive endings, typically marked by ceremonial surrenders or truces. The war in Iraq, by contrast, has not achieved a clear-cut ending. Indeed, more U.S. soldiers died after President George W. Bush declared an end to "major combat operations" in May 2003 than were killed during the 3 weeks of fighting that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (139 before the President's declaration and more than 1,300 after it, as of the time this article was written; iCasualties, 2005).

Yet in a political sense, at least, the war ended on the morning of April 9, 2003. Early that day, reporters in Baghdad began noting that Iraqi government officials, including the "minders" who followed and tried to censor foreign journalists, were not reporting to work. As the sun set in Iraq and rose in America, television audiences were told that the regime of Saddam Hussein had come to an end.

Still, government workers not showing up to work does not make for gripping television, or for a fitting symbolic denouement to war. In addition, there was the contradictory fact that intense fighting continued throughout Baghdad during the entire day

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and into the night of April 9th. Major operations were yet to be staged in the still unsettled northern part of the country, including Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. Hussein himself would not be captured for months. Between the apparent conclusion to the political war and the continuation of the military one lay a narrative gap for the news to bridge. Into that void came what the press quickly identified as the picture that symbolized the war's end: the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad's Firdos Square, located across the street from the Palestine Hotel, where many international journalists were staying.

This study analyzes how that image, due largely to its iconic status, introduced a "victory" frame into news coverage of the war on CNN and Fox News Channel (FNC) and how that frame in turn led to the war falling largely off the news agenda. In doing so, this study adds to a literature merging framing and agenda-setting research. Specifically, we argue that the coverage of the statue falling employed a historical narrative that revealed the mind-set of many journalists covering the story and contributed to the victory frame's power in shaping the news-agenda. As has become apparent in the succeeding 2 years, this had profound implications for both international policy and the domestic political landscape in America.

The Press and Patriotism During War

Press coverage during wartime is something quite apart from the adversarial, detached role that Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black envisioned when he wrote: "Paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell" (Sharkey, 2001, p. 21). Although antagonism between the media and the military is well documented (Aukofer & Lawrence, 1995; Wilson, 2001), prior research shows that press coverage during war is typically uncritical and often patriotic, even jingoistic (Kellner, 1992; Newhagen, 1994; Pyle, 1979). As Hallin (1984) has demonstrated, this includes coverage of the Vietnam War, despite its reputation as being reported on by a hostile media.

This comports with prior research into press coverage of foreign policy and war, which has found that the news tends to parrot official sources and party lines, especially those from the White House. Most notably, Bennett (1989, 1994) has shown that news coverage of war and foreign policy is indexed to the limited range of elite opinions, at least in the short run. Dickson (1995), for example, found that government sources defined the range of debate in *New York Times* coverage of the U.S. invasion of Panama. Entman and Page (1994) found similar results in coverage leading up to the beginning of the Persian Gulf War, showing that dissenters received less coverage than did officials who exercised some control over war policy and that the press rarely aired fundamental critiques of administration policy.

These findings hold important lessons for understanding coverage of the events in Firdos Square on April 9th, especially when one considers that the war in Iraq had

even more elite consensus, at least as defined by the number of senators voting to grant the President the authority to declare war, than did the Persian Gulf War in 1991. In 1991, the U.S. Senate voted 52 to 47, and the House 250 to 183, in favor of a resolution authorizing the president to use "all necessary means" to drive the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. By contrast, a similar resolution in 2002 passed the Senate 77 to 33 and the House 296 to 133.

Although there is disagreement about whether it is functional or dysfunctional for the press to be intentionally patriotic (or, alternatively, objective) in wartime, our concern here is not with such normative questions. Rather, we are interested in understanding how journalists, consciously or unconsciously, framed a critical moment in the war, the fall of Hussein's statue in Firdos Square. Hence, the relevance of studies showing the press to be historically favorable to elite sources, especially during war, are relevant to this study because they provide a context out of which a victory frame might be expected to arise. That is, a press primed by administration officials to expect unqualified celebrations on the part of liberated Iraqis (as we will discuss in more detail later) might be particularly inclined to reflexively frame an event in similar terms.

Iconic Framing of Media Events

Many scholars have noted the relationship between historical analogies and iconic images in framing coverage of wars, foreign policy, and other dramatic events such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Shaw and Martin (1993) have shown how the press often seeks to understand wars and their seminal moments by looking backward. So, World War II's Battle of the Bulge was used as the analogy for the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War, and Saddam Hussein became the living incarnation of Adolf Hitler before and during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. These analogies can frame media and elite debate, often at the exclusion of other legitimate frames that might have encouraged different policy choices (Dorman & Livingston, 1994).

The power of historical metaphor is not limited to semantics however. Zeltzer (2002) argued that the invocation of value-laden iconic photographs can have similar effects, including the marshaling of public support for political and military action. Cottle (2002) further argued that the image of the collapsing Trade Center has now become itself an iconic image rife with meaning. As we will show, on April 9th the iconic historical reference point for the press was the image of East Germans tearing down the Berlin Wall in 1989, an image that helped feed a victory frame suggesting the war was over.

Indeed, one finds similar iconographic images associated with most modern wars. Sontag (2003) has called these "canonical images." Whether reflecting deeper cultural needs for symbolic catharsis, or the more immediate needs of the propagandist, a common feature of canonical images is their synthetic nature. They are often mixtures of actual events and stagecraft; for example, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and

his Rough Riders recreating their charge up San Juan Hill after the Vitagraph cameramen concluded the actual charge—which was also filmed—lacked sufficient drama (Sontag, 2003). Similarly, the photograph of U.S. Marines raising the flag atop Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima is regarded as one of the greatest photographs in American history, yet the scene captured by cameraman Joe Rosenthal was staged and the picture cropped to enhance its power (Sontag, 2003). In short, iconographic images often arise from a confluence of circumstances and, at times, various degrees of manipulation. American soldiers, for example, ended up being the ones who actually brought down the statue of Hussein in Firdos Square on April 9th. Whatever their origins, visual images can produce deep iconographic significance.

With this in mind, Bennett and Lawrence's (1995) discussion of news icons is particularly useful in understanding the dynamics of the Firdos Square coverage. They defined a news icon as "a powerful condensational image, arising out of a news event, that evokes primary cultural themes" (p. 22). They added that iconic images live on "beyond [their] originating event by being introduced into a variety of subsequent news contexts" (p. 20). In their conceptualization, icons can be either culturally affirming or challenging. Although Bennett and Lawrence focused on an instance in which an icon (a trash-laden barge that called attention to environmental issues) opened a policy window that challenged the status quo, the question this study explores is whether the image of the Hussein statue falling had just the opposite effect, pushing other challenging story lines (e.g., the continued resistance of Iraqi soldiers and the continued inability to find evidence of weapons of mass destruction) off the news agenda in favor of a narrative reinforcing the liberator and victory frames.

The Power of News Frames to Make Images Iconic and Set the Media Agenda

News framing offers a useful way of understanding the relationship between iconic imagery and the events they not only depict but come to define. A useful conceptualization—the one that will be used here—is provided by Ertman (1993), who said that news framing involves reporters selecting certain information to include in stories and making some of that information more salient. For our purposes, it is also helpful to think of Gansom and Lasch's (1983) related conceptualization of a frame as "a central organizing idea for understanding events related to the issue question" (p. 398). In later writings relevant to coverage of Firdos Square, Gansom and his colleagues also pointed out that frames have a variety of ingredients, or devices, that define their character, including metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, moral appeals, visual images, and other symbolic devices (Gansom, 1989; Gansom & Lasch, 1983; Gansom & Modigliani, 1989). Thus, iconic imagery can be seen as the visual component of a frame used by journalists in covering an event.

This study asks, did the media's selection of the image of the statue falling, infused with the latent meaning derived from the exemplar of the fall of the Berlin Wall and

falling Lenin statues in 1989, form the central component of what we call a victory frame that had an immediate influence on news coverage of the war and public opinion? A victory frame is defined here as one that selects and makes salient information—narrative and visual—that suggests the United States has won the war, as opposed to information that would comprise alternative frames, such as battle imagery that gives the impression that the war continues.

To better understand the origins of the victory frame, it is helpful to recall the context of the Iraq War, specifically the rhetoric employed by White House officials. Leading up to the 2003 war, the Bush administration had prepared the press and the public for the day when U.S. troops would be welcomed as liberators by Iraqis. This is similar to Dobkin's (1993) argument that ABC and CNN coverage of the first Gulf War employed a structural frame that followed the lead, and served the purposes, of the Pentagon and White House by creating a narrative of villains and heroes. In this case, use of the word "liberator" is important, for it implicitly invokes the historical imagery of American soldiers being joyously greeted by flower-throwing Italian and French citizens as they pushed the Nazis back toward Germany during World War II. In an interview with Jim Lehrer on PBS's *The News Hour* on February 20th, for example, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld elaborated on what might be called "the Sicily" metaphor by adding a more recent example:

There is no question but that [American soldiers] would be welcomed [by Iraqis]. Go back to Afghanistan, the people were in the streets playing music, cheering, flying kites, and doing all the things that the Taliban and the al-Qaeda would not let them do. (Rosenberg, 2003, p. E1)

Lang and Lang's (1968) seminal study of the 1951 homecoming parade of General Douglas MacArthur in Chicago shows us how these images are often anticipated by the press to the point that they may in fact be unconsciously manufactured. Lang and Lang discovered that a "pattern of expectations" was established by the media before the actual event. In order to fulfill those expectations, television producers selected images and television reporters made statements that significantly exaggerated both the size and enthusiasm of the crowd. Moreover, Lang and Lang found that during the parade, spectators tended to bunch around television cameras, making crowds appear much larger than they actually were. The authors' larger point was that the nature of the television medium can overdramatize events and ultimately give a false impression that drives public opinion. In many ways the coverage of Firdos Square had these same characteristics.

Finally, despite calls to merge the two research streams, to date most of the framing literature has had little empirical to say about what effect different frames have on shaping news agendas (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Recently, however, some studies have attempted to bring the two together either in comparison (Gross & Aday, 2003) or theoretically (Aday, 1999; Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998; McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs & Estrada, 1997). These studies follow prior research exami-

ing how media agendas are set in the first place. For instance, some have found that real world cues set both the news and audience agenda (Behr & Iyengar, 1985), whereas others have shown that some news organs are particularly influential in shaping the agendas in others (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991). In the specific area of foreign policy and war coverage, however, it is government elites and especially the White House that have been shown to exercise a privileged role in shaping news agendas (Bennett, 1994; Entman & Page, 1994).

These studies raise the possibility that events, elites, or news norms can create or encourage certain frames that then themselves influence news agendas. This study adds to this literature by exploring whether the victory frame—assuming it was employed on April 9th—had the effect of pushing the war off the news agenda in the days that followed, despite the fact that intense battles continued to be fought in Baghdad and throughout the country.

Method

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger research project analyzing media coverage of the war in Iraq from March 20th to April 20th on five networks: CNN, FNC, and the three broadcast networks. We limited our analysis in this study to CNN and FNC primarily for the simple reason that they were the only 24-hour channels for which data were gathered as part of that larger study¹ and, therefore, were the only ones that covered the events of April 9th all day. This was critical given our interest in seeing if and how a victory frame evolved throughout the news cycle. The fact that FNC and CNN were engaged in a major ratings war increased our interest in them as test cases. Finally, the fact that both channels have been accused by some of partisan bias (though in opposite ways) added to their salience (for just two of numerous examples, see Kudlow, 2005, and Media Matters for America, 2005). If, for example, it turns out that they both adopted a victory frame, that would add weight to the argument that such a perspective was somehow common to journalism rather than just a given network's slant. Of course, the fact that both are 24-hour channels may be part of the explanation, too, something we cannot rule out without comparison points from the big three networks.

For this study, we employed two levels of analysis, one to assess whether a victory frame was adopted by the networks, and another, briefer, analysis to see what effect if any that frame had on shaping the news agenda in the following week. A victory frame is operationalized as being marked by analogies to historically significant culminating moments in past wars (especially iconographic images), repetitive overplaying and exaggeration of celebratory images, and a narrative explicitly asserting the war is over.

One of the theoretical questions our study asks is what role framing has on shaping news agendas. Thus, this first level of analysis must necessarily come before any examination of the media agenda. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1: Did the networks employ a victory frame spurred by the falling statue in their coverage on April 9, 2003?

To answer this question, a census of stories aired on CNN and FNC between 11:00 a.m. (the statue fell at 10:50 a.m.) and 8:00 p.m. (EST) on April 9, 2003, was examined in 18 half-hour increments looking at the following variables: images of the statue falling, quantity of battle stories and visuals, crowd size descriptions (for Firdos Square only), references labeling the event as historic, and wide-angle versus close-up shots of the square. We will also include in our discussion some illustrative qualitative data from just prior to the statue falling. In the interest of not lumping noncomparative data, we stopped our analysis at 8:00 p.m. because that is when commentary-oriented programming begins on FNC (with *The O'Reilly Factor*).

Although the central focus of our study is the frame employed by the networks in covering the statue's fall, we are also asking what effect that frame might have had on shaping the news agenda. The most effective way to do this is to simply adopt the independent variable from the agenda-setting literature—the frequency of topics covered by the networks—and make it our dependent variable for this part of the analysis. In this case, then, the victory frame (should it, in fact, be employed) would be the independent variable because a frame that assumes the war is over should have the effect of reducing the amount of battle coverage. Hence, from our initial research question we derive a hypothesis:

H1: If a victory frame is employed by the networks in their coverage of the events of April 9th (i.e., that RQ1 is confirmed), there will be fewer battle-related stories in the week following the fall of Hussein's statue as compared to the week prior.

To test this hypothesis we performed a content analysis of CNN from 5:00 to 5:30 p.m. and FNC from 6:00 to 6:30 p.m. during the 7 days prior to, and the 7 days following, April 9th (i.e., April 2–8 and April 10–16). These times were chosen because both were the first half hour of shows hosted by each network's flagship anchor—Wolf Blitzer at CNN and Brit Hume on FNC—and they therefore offered comparable programming. The analysis of H1 looked at the following variables: story main topic, story subtopics, and battle visuals. Whereas in the analysis of RQ1, in the first part of the study (looking solely at coverage on April 9th), the unit of analysis was each half-hour bloc of coverage, for testing H1, analyses were performed at the story level. A total of 163 stories were included in this part of the analysis.

Several points about the analysis of the news agenda are worth clarifying. First, the data collected for this section represent a census, not a sample, of war-related stories airing on the two networks during those time periods. Thus, frequencies are appropriate and sufficient to describe the data, and other statistical tests (e.g., *t* tests) that presume sampling are unnecessary. Second, the second level of analysis (comparing coverage the week before and week after April 9th) is not intended to show the presence of the victory frame in coverage during the week following the events in Firdos Square, doing so would mean making the independent variable and dependent vari-

able the same, or changing the study to merely a framing analysis that included both the 9th and the week after. This also means that the coverage attributes examined in the framing analysis from April 9th coverage—for example, wide shots versus close-ups—are not relevant to an analysis of the news agendas before and after that day and are therefore not included in that part of the analysis.

A team of four graduate and three undergraduate student coders in a communication program at a major mid-Atlantic private university were involved in the second level of analysis looking at the weeks before and after April 9th. Two coders performed the first level of analysis, examining just the coverage on the day the statue fell. Because of the nominal nature of the variables, the Scott's *pi* statistic for intercoder reliability was used, with coefficients ranging from .70 to 1.00, which are considered good to excellent (Krippendorff, 2004).

Results

The Rapid Emergence of the Victory Frame

It took more than 2 hours for the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square to fall. CNN and FNC, both of whom had reporters and crews based across the street in the Palestine Hotel, ran nearly constant live images of a crowd of Iraqis milling about the statue, throwing debris at it, and for a while taking turns trying to knock it down with a sledgehammer. Shortly after 10:00 a.m. American Marines in a tank recovery vehicle entered the square and began assisting in the effort. At 10:50, having tied a rope from the statue to their vehicle, the Americans pulled the statue to the ground. The crowd swarmed around, stomping on it, and eventually dragging its head through the nearby streets.²

In actuality, much of the 2 hours before the statue fell did not consist of much in the way of dramatic visuals. Other than the few minutes of sledgehammering, events did not develop any real momentum until close to 10:30 when an American Marine began climbing the statue, leading to a brief but controversial moment when the soldier hung an American flag on its face before quickly taking it down and replacing it with a pre-Gulf War Iraqi flag. Both networks wasted no time priming their audience to understand the historical significance of the impending fall of the statue. For example, at 9:45 a.m. on CNN, Bill Hemmer said as crowds gathered in the square:

You think about seminal moments in a nation's history ... indelible moments like the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that's what we're seeing right now: Regular Iraqis with their opportunity and their chance to take their own axe to take down Saddam Hussein.

On FNC, David Asman also framed the event in historical terms, with increasing anticipation:

[8:52 a.m.]: You are seeing history in the making right now.
 [9:30 a.m.]: My goosebumps have never been higher than they are right now.
 [10:12 a.m.]: This is one of those moments in history that we are privileged to be reporting on.

The last comment was echoed seconds later by anchor and longtime network correspondent Brit Hume: "This transcends anything I've ever seen."

Securely placed in the context of recent revolutionary moments, the actual toppling of the statue immediately became the dominant image of the day's news. On FNC, the image of the statue falling was replayed an average of 6.83 times every half hour between 11:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m., or about once every 4.4 minutes on average. On CNN, the shot ran an average of 4 times every half hour, or once every 7½ minutes (Figure 1).³ An independent samples *t* test shows the differences between FNC and CNN to be statistically significant, $t(34) = 3.157, p < .01$. Further evidence that it was this image that achieved iconic status to the press, and not others devoid of the same iconic historical reference points (such as the ripping of posters of Hussein), can be found in the fact that this was the visual used as early as midafternoon on the 9th to promote upcoming shows on both channels. And per Bennett and Lawrence (1995), the image quickly became reproduced in other news contexts. Specifically, it became a branding device for both CNN and FNC, which began including it in montages of images used in "house ads" promoting the networks on April 10th.⁴

Also important to consider is how the events at Firdos Square looked on television. Recalling Lang and Lang's (1968) MacArthur parade study, broadcast images of the toppling of the statue also tended to exaggerate the size of the crowd. Wide-angle shots show clearly that the Square was never close to being even a quarter full during this period, and never had more than a few hundred people in it (many of them reporters). Before the statue fell, and shortly after, reporters on both channels occasionally gave estimates of, or described, the number of people in the square, although they did not always agree. For instance, on CNN, reporter Christiane Amanpour, watching

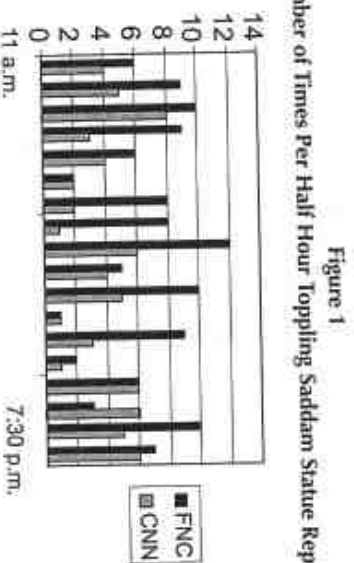


Figure 1
 Number of Times Per Half Hour Toppling Saddam Statue Replayed

events unfold from Kuwait City, frequently called the crowd "small" before the fall of the statue, but a minute after it collapsed on-scene reporter Simon Robinson guessed its size at close to 1,500. One might be inclined to believe Robinson since he was in the square, but two reporters for print organizations interviewed later by CNN—Melinda Liu of Newsweek and Craig Nelson of Cox News Service—both independently estimated that "dozens . . . maybe a couple hundred" (Liu at 11:37 a.m.) or "200 to 300" (Nelson at 7:04 p.m.) were in the crowd. On FNC, there were two references to the crowd being "small" between noon and 12:30 p.m., and between 4:00 and 4:30 p.m. there was one reference to it being large and one saying it was small. Other than the Liu and Nelson descriptions already mentioned, CNN had one reference to the crowd being small every half hour between 10:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. (mostly from Amanpour) and one description of it being large in each half hour between 10:30 and 11:00 a.m.

Throughout the day, then, it was the pictures themselves that were left to tell viewers whether the number of Iraqis in the square was closer to a few or something much larger. Before the statue fell, when coverage was still live, both FNC and CNN would often cut back and forth from close-ups to wide-angle shots, the latter of which gave a sense of the crowd's size. Throughout the day both channels refrained from showing wide shots, choosing instead the more dramatic close-ups in which celebrating Iraqis filled the frame (Figures 2 and 3). As Lang and Lang (1968) argued, television's preference for tight shots over visuals that give a broader view of the scene can inadvertently render a false impression of the events being covered.

Furthermore, previous research on the power of visuals to mix with audio and create a larger, and often misleading, news narrative (e.g., Jamieson, 1992), suggests that when anchors on both channels described "jubilant crowds," and more generally "Iraqis," while the televised image was filled with Iraqis, viewers would be likely to get the impression that something closer to many thousands, not a few hundred, were present. This is important because it created the impression that Iraqi citizens were

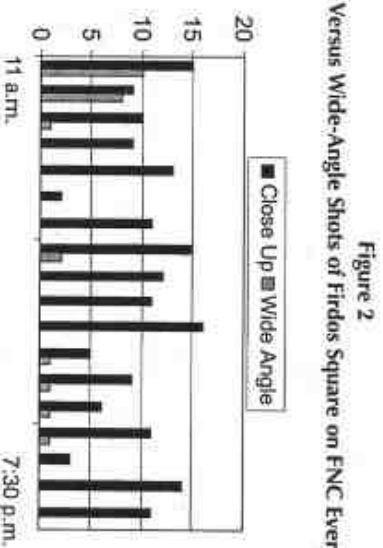
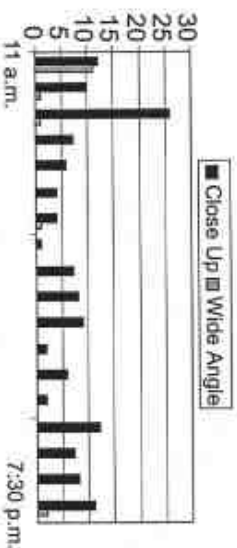


Figure 2
 Close-Ups Versus Wide-Angle Shots of Firdos Square on FNC Every Half Hour

Figure 3
Close-Ups Versus Wide-Angle Shots of Firdos Square on CNN Every Half Hour



welcoming Americans as liberators, as promised by administration officials in the months leading up to the war.

Indeed, as the day unfolded, the events in Firdos Square broadcast in the morning (U.S. time) increasingly took on a life of their own and began being described in terms of a historic liberation of an oppressed people. As already mentioned, anchors on both channels began employing this language well before the statue fell. Throughout the day, as CNN and FNC played the image of a toppling Hussein over and over, this language continued. On CNN, where an average of about 1 1/2 such uses of "historic" were uttered every 30 minutes between noon and 8:00 p.m., lead anchor Wolf Blitzer opened virtually every half hour with some variation of "this historic day." FNC also made some reference to the historical nature of the morning's events about 1 1/2 times every 30 minutes. In Entman's (1993) definition of framing, salience means in part the ordering of stories and information within a newscast, where the journalistic standard of inverted pyramid means what leads is most important. These references to the day's events being "historic" usually appeared at the beginning of each half-hour segment, thereby framing the news for viewers. For example, as Iraqi's shouted and stomped on the fallen statue, FNC's Asman said at 11:00 a.m., "What you are seeing is the sounds and sights of liberation."

The saturation coverage of the statue falling crowded out other potential stories and alternative frames. Most notably, despite the fact that fighting continued throughout Baghdad during that day, not to mention across the country, little of this was shown to viewers. At 12:17 p.m., for example, FNC showed a map of Baghdad revealing six armed engagements in the city that day, but no visuals were provided then or later. In fact, FNC did not air any battle imagery until 5:30 p.m., and then only once or twice per half hour. CNN aired more visuals (an average of 3.25 per half hour), but these were almost all the same pictures from embedded correspondent Martin Savidge's coverage of the aforementioned firefight at Baghdad University, plus occasional images from another CNN reporter embedded with American troops fighting alongside Kurds in Northern Iraq that were much less dramatic. In other words, CNN did not show its audience that a war was going on but rather that two relatively uneventful battles took place. This occurred despite the fact that early in the morning, anchor

Paula Zahn mentioned in passing that CNN had been getting reports from correspondents—not necessarily their own—throughout Baghdad that the city was in "total anarchy." Presumably because these reporters did not have camera crews, this story quickly disappeared and was rarely if ever referenced throughout the day.

In the absence of stories about the war, the statue falling (which of course was a gripping visual) quickly framed the war for FNC and CNN. This is a crucial point because whereas battle stories imply a war is going on, statues falling—especially when placed in the context of truly climactic images from recent history—imply the war is over. Indeed, that was increasingly the tone of anchors throughout the day. Immediately after the statue falls, for example, FNC anchors began thinking in terms of the postwar power dynamics:

Brit Hume: I wonder what Dominique de Villepin and Jacques Chirac are saying now?

David Asman: Brit, what role do you think de Villepin and Chirac and Al Jazeera and all the others [that opposed the war] will play now?

Brit Hume: They're not players at all.

Similarly, by the afternoon on CNN the view that the war was over had become the dominant theme for anchors. CNN's Wolf Blitzer introduced the clip of the statue falling at 5:05 p.m. by saying, "This is the image that sums up the day and in many ways the war itself." Five minutes later he asked Lebanese Broadcasting Channel reporter Sulian Sliman in a rhetorical tone, "Is it your sense, Sulian, that this war for all practical purposes is over?" On CNN, the connection was made even more explicit in a video commentary by anchor Lou Dobbs that used contrasting images of the revolutions of 1989 and Firdos Square to underscore a narrative placing war opponents on the wrong side of history.

In summary, then, *RQ₁* was supported. A victory frame—marked by historical allusions to culminating events in past conflicts (especially the Cold War), narratives describing the day in terms of an historic liberation, repeated airing of the iconic image of the statue falling, and the crowding out of alternative story lines that would suggest the war was not over—dominated the day's coverage.

The Victory Frame's Effect on the News Agenda

Having established that the networks did indeed adopt a victory frame on April 9th, the next question is whether this was a transitory frame that only shaped coverage on that day, or whether it had the lasting effect of influencing the news agendas of CNN and FNC in the days that followed. A comparison of coverage in the week before and after the statue fell shows that in fact the frame appears to have had an immediate and powerful impact on those agendas:

Keeping in mind that much fighting lay ahead for U.S. and coalition soldiers, especially in the northern part of the country but also in many parts of Baghdad itself, there was still very much a war to be covered. In fact, 13 U.S. soldiers died in the following week. As Table 1 illustrates, however, the networks showed a dramatic decline in the quantity of war coverage, which decreased by 70% on FNC and 26% on CNN. Even though we did not include the three broadcast networks in our study because they were not on air throughout the day on the 9th, an analysis of their coverage in the week prior to and the week after the statue fell shows a similar pattern: War stories dropped by 66% at ABC, by 58% at NBC, and by 39% at CBS.

More to the point, both battle stories and their corollary stories about strategy and tactics, virtually disappeared. On FNC, battle stories declined 79%, and stories about strategies and tactics went down 81%; on CNN, the numbers declined 81 and 89%. This mirrors what happened on April 9th itself: Other than CNN's early replaying of a minor firefight caught on camera by one of their embedded reporters, the battles that raged across Baghdad and much of the rest of the country virtually ceased to be discussed as the afternoon wore on.

Finally, the battlefield itself disappeared: Stories accompanied by visuals of fighting went down 76% on FNC and 73% on CNN. Despite the fact that fighting continued literally blocks from Firdos Square, apparently no camera crews were dispatched to capture those images. According to CNN and FNC, in other words, the war ended with the collapse of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square.⁵

In summary, H₁ was also supported: Battle stories and their accompanying visuals ceased to dominate the news agendas at the two networks immediately after April

Table 1
Comparing War Coverage on FNC and CNN the Week Before and the Week After April 9th

	FNC	CNN
Total war stories		
7 days before April 9th	44	61
7 days after April 9th	13	45
Total war stories with battle or strategy/tactics as main topic		
7 days before April 9th	28	36
7 days after April 9th	6	7
Total war stories with battle or strategy/tactics as subtopic		
7 days before April 9th	48	36
7 days after April 9th	9	4
Total war stories with combat visuals		
7 days before April 9th	33	41
7 days after April 9th	8	11

Note: FNC = Fox News Channel; CNN = Cable News Network.

9th. One possible explanation for this could be that some other story line unrelated to the war happened to take over the news agenda the week after the statue fell. However, this does not appear to be the case: A Lexis-Nexis search reveals that of 52 front-page stories in the *New York Times* during that time period, only 7 were on other topics, and none warranted more than one story.

Agenda setting is concerned with the effect of those news agendas on setting the audience agenda, something that fell outside the scope of this study. Yet we do have illustrative data to support the notion that coverage of the statue falling shaped public opinion in the days that followed. First, the percentage thinking the war was over jumped from 28% on April 8th to 41% the following week (Pew Research Center Poll, 2003). Second, we also see the kind of rally effect in support for President Bush that one would expect in what appeared to be a successfully culminated war. Remembering that American public opinion already reflected the normal rally effect present during the early days of a war, approval of President Bush's handling of Iraq (the most precise measure of what we are interested in) went from 69% on April 3rd (CBS/New York Times, 2003a) to 76% the week after the statue fell (Marrs, 2003). Similarly, Bush's general approval rating went up 6 points between April 3rd and April 14th, from 67% to 73% (CBS/New York Times, 2003b). Hence, what we see is the following progression: A news frame shaped the media agenda at FNC and CNN, which then seems to have shaped the audience agenda and even bolstered support for the President.

Discussion

Already primed by administration assurances that American troops would be welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi people, and with images of earlier regimes ending with the toppling of statues and edifices that symbolized tyranny fresh in their collective memory, journalists at CNN and FNC saw the falling of Hussein's statue in Firdos Square as a definitive sign that the war was over. The selection of that image over others that may have provided a less climactic sense of the war, and the salience accorded to it throughout the day, rendered it the defining component of a victory frame employed by both networks. This frame was evident in comments by anchors and reporters that the war had ended and appears to have had the effect of dramatically reducing the amount of war coverage on the news agenda in the days immediately following the statue's fall.

Although in an important way the war did "end" on April 9th (i.e., the regime ceased to exist politically), and in a sense the toppling statue could reasonably be seen as a symbol of this part of the story, in many other ways the coverage on CNN and FNC was misleading. Most obviously, intense fighting continued. In addition, continued replaying of close-up images of the statue falling gave the false impression that masses of Iraqis participated, that such scenes were typical and representative of the state of the war, and that the Iraqi people unflinchingly welcomed the Americans as liberators.

From a theoretical perspective, this study adds to a growing literature exploring the relationship between news frames and news agendas. For some time, scholars have called for linkages between these two major streams of research, and this study contributes to the building of such a bridge by showing how a news frame—in this case the victory frame—can change the news agenda. The process by which this occurred went thusly: Government elites primed an anticipated victory frame before the war, and then when events (i.e., the toppling of the statue) transpired that fit that frame, the press reflexively adopted it. This in turn had an immediate effect on the news agenda. This model is consistent with prior research showing the government, and particularly the White House, exercises a great deal of influence over the scope and substance of war coverage (Bennett, 1994; Entman & Page, 1994). It also adds to our understanding of the relationship between framing and agenda setting by showing how the former can affect the latter.

That the effect was dramatically more pronounced at FNC than CNN is startling, and we can only speculate as to its explanation. To be sure, it is CNN that is the outlier, not FNC, which was more in line with the coverage at the three broadcast networks than was CNN. Still, FNC showed the most dramatic declines. This may be related to the finding in several recent studies that the network's war coverage since the September 11th terrorist attacks has adhered more closely to the Bush administration's agenda, and has been more likely to engage in patriotic journalism, than other networks (Adley, Livingston, & Hebert, 2005; Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2003; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2002). Keeping the indexing hypothesis in mind, it could be that FNC showed a greater drop in war coverage because, as the network most sympathetic to the administration's war policy, they were more prone to adopt the victory frame and more likely to have it influence their news agenda subsequently. This would also explain why they showed the iconic victory image—the statue falling—more often than CNN, although it is unclear why they showed more wide-angle shots.

The findings reported here have important implications for public opinion, although establishing this relationship empirically fell outside the scope of this study. In addition, the role of press norms and routines in encouraging the adoption of some frames over others seems a fertile line of inquiry. As discussed, a lot was going on in Baghdad that day, some of it celebratory but much of it bloody. Yet television news, in many ways even more dependent on efficient means of producing news than print (Gans, 1979), told the story easiest to convey through pictures.

Notes

¹MSNBC was not included due to the combination of taping limitations and its relatively low ratings.

²Since that day there has been some speculation that the entire event was stage-managed by the military, owing in particular to the fact that it occurred across the street from the hotel housing virtually all of the international media. A recent U.S. Army report does reveal the important role played by a Psychological Operations unit that morning, although according to the chronology of the report their role mainly consisted in helping the crowd of Iraqis bring down the statue

and replacing an American flag briefly hung over Hussein's face with an Iraqi flag (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2004).

³One could reasonably argue that median or mode would be better measures of central tendency for these data. The story does not change much if one uses median and actually becomes more dramatic when using mode. The median number of appearance on FNC was 7, and the data are tri-modal (6, 9, 10). On CNN the median was 4, and the modal frequency was 6.

⁴Just to be clear, we are not referring to ads promoting upcoming shows that will discuss the statue, or even the war in general, where it would make sense to include the image. We are referring to ads promoting the network itself. CNN's first use of the image as a branding device came at 4:46 p.m. on the 10th, followed by FNC at 5:57 p.m.

⁵Some readers may see a need for a measure of statistical significance. We do not believe such a measure is informative when presenting data based on an entire population as is the case here (Wonnacott & Wonnacott, 1990, p. 265). We offer it for the value it may provide. Using an independent samples *t* test, the differences were statistically significant at FNC, $t(12) = 13.864, p < .001$, and at CNN, $t(12) = 2.744, p < .05$.

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